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ABSTRACT

The use of holistic cognitive style in black language is discussed in this paper. Two types of cognitive style, analytic and holistic, are identified. Holistic thinkers are described as socially oriented while analytical thinkers are characterized as task oriented. Evidence is given to support the claim that blacks tend to be holistic thinkers and that this is reflected in their language. The features that mark black language as holistic are discussed, and include: (1) lack of distance between black writers and their audiences, as demonstrated by the use of the second person "you" in academic papers; (2) transitional features, such as grammatical, semantic, phonological, and usage misapplications of words and morphemes; (3) distinctive classification, marked by the relative absence of hierarchical ranking and of comparative terms; and (4) the use of concrete imagery and, in fiction, the use of proverbs. (Author/APM)

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# BLACK LANGUAGE AND HOLISTIC COGNITIVE STYLE

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## BLACK LANGUAGE AND HOLISTIC COGNITIVE STYLE

Studies of Black language have usually focused on the vernacular dialect, defined as a rather narrow set of grammatical and phonological features. Some investigators have included stylistic and lexical features. Few have looked at standard English spoken by Blacks. Origins of the language of Blacks have been traced to African language, creolization, older forms of English, community segregation patterns, or some combination of these. Almost no one has examined the influence of cognitive style.

Cognitive style refers to ways of perceiving, assimilating, organizing, and expressing oneself about the world. Researchers have identified a continuum of cognitive style with holistic and analytic poles. Holistic thinkers are socially oriented and can be distracted from a task by social concerns; analytic thinkers are task oriented and are not distracted by social concerns. The two types of thinkers differ in what they attend to, what is important to them, and how they behave, including how they use language. For instance, holistic thinkers' language reflects their social orientation through a lack of distance, use of transitional features, lack of certain classification features, and extensive use of concrete imagery. (cf Cohen, 1969, Witkin, et. al., 1977; Sigel, 1970; Vygotsky, 1978; Luria, 1976, and others.) While the full range of the continuum of cognitive style is found in all races, certain ethnic and social groups tend to prefer and, therefore, reinforce a decidedly holistic or a decidedly analytic style. (cf Ramírez and Castañeda, 1974).

Blacks, as a group, tend to be predominantly holistic thinkers. For instance, a 1978 study of 200 Black college freshmen showed that 92% were holistic thinkers. ( Cooper, 1978b). Traditional Black culture reinforces holistic thinking, and this thinking is reflected in the language used by many Blacks. Some of these features may be found in the language of Black standard English speakers as well as the language of Black vernacular speakers; some are directly traceable to African origins, and some are more subtle manifestations of traditional values.

One manifestation of holistic thinking is lack of distance in language. Holistic thinkers prefer both psychological and physical closeness to their group. The social orientation of the traditional African culture reinforces holistic thinking, and many Blacks throughout the world retain the holistic style of the traditional culture. The typical Black American church, for instance, makes use of the call response between preacher and congregation. The same type of interaction with the audience was an important part of the traditional performers' oral presentation in most Black African groups. In fact, the community status of the performer was generally related to his ability to elicit response. (cf Finnegan, 1970) Present day "loud talkin'" and "signifyin'"- types of verbal dueling in which the intent is to annoy, insult, publish private information, or tease - are also holistic uses of language traceable to Africa. Traditional poets sometimes employed just such techniques when a marcahantor leader refused the poets' services, refused them payment, or otherwise angered them. (cf Finnegan, 1970). "Rappin'","stylin' out" and "shuckin' and jivin'" are also calculated to please the hearer. What is said is not as important as the <u>way</u> it is said. Just as the <u>performances</u> of the traditional poet, historian, and storyteller were of utmost importance, so the <u>performance</u> of the speaker

is of the utmost importance in many Black communities today.

One stylistic feature that appears to focus on the individual is also reflective of the group orientation of holistic thinking. The arrogant "Ain't I clean?' or "I'm out of sight" boasting rhetoric that is illustrated in some song lyrics such as : "To 'come a woman, you got to go to school; I'm a lover from way back home; I have a ball wherever I roam" ( quoted in Watkins, 1971, p. 34.) really illustrates a desire for acceptance by the group and at the same time the desirability of the group. It is related to the traditional custom in many African societies of the newly initiated male's self-praise. This self-praise was a reflection of the greatness of the whole group to which he belonged; i. e. "I am great, but I am you, so you are great." The holistic thinker does not separate from the group; all parts of the group are the whole, and the whole is all parts; all are equal.

Lack of distance is also apparant in writing, often in subtle ways. Compositions of Black holistic college students were examined for distance by checking for an objective, third person, non-involved point- of-view. (See Sigel, 1970). A statistically significant number of the holistic students' paper demonstrated lack of distance when compared to analytic thinkers' papers. (Cooper, 1980). Holistic students preferred the second person <u>you</u>, which directly addresses the reader. For instance, students wrote:

> <u>"This university prepare you for the job you are trying to get and obtain by the time you have taking the required courses you need."</u> (sic)
>
> <u>"Its purpose is to give you varity of skills so you can succeed in life."</u>
>
> (Cooper, 1980b)

A vivid example of lack of distance is illustrated in an excerpt from a sophomore student's term paper - not part of the study:

> This same name company informed one of its biggest stars a few years earlier that if she persisted with her plans to tour Europe...she would not record for anyone else. She went. That was around ten years ago. I haven't heard a thing recorded by her for about ten years. Wonder where she is today? Going from nabob to nonentity overnight is a real case of the blues. Have you ever had the blues?
>
> (Cooper, 1978)

The passage is, of course, standard English, but its use of a conversational tone, the use of the direct address, and its use of the direct question to the reader add up to the holistic desire for reader involvement. Of course, all writers want their readers to be involved; however, the holistic thinker expresses a much more personal and direct involvement than the analytic thinker in writing for academic and professional, i.e. non-personal purposes.

The use of so-called "impersonal" you has been recognized by linguists and grammarians and is common in the speech of persons from all groups. However, its persistence in academic papers where its use is restricted, and , in most cases forbidden, indicates an underlying tie to the social nature of the second person usage; the intimate involvement of the writer with the reader; again, such usage was found in significantly greater numbers in the papers of holistic as compared to analytic thinkers.

Transitional features are also found more frequently in the language of holistic thinkers. The term "transitional features" covers grammatical, phonological, semantic, and usage misapplications of words and morphemes the may result from a person's moving from one dialect or language to another and/or adding new lexical items to his repertoire. Because the holistic thinker does not attend to details, in acquiring new language forms, he may not carefully note the exact constratints on a form.



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In the 1978 study of students' papers, holistic thinkers had a statistically significantly larger usage of transitional features than did analytic thinkers. Some selections are:

"And education from a university enables you.." - pronunciation hypercorrection

" You start feeling selfconscience." - usage confusion

"You start getting adjust to the axroundings." - pronunciation confusion

"... you have taking..." - hypercorrection of ing form; confusion of form

As one can note, some features reflect influence of a vernacular; others reflect an attempt to broaden the vocabulary; all indicate a lack of attention to the forms of the words needed for the contexts.

The feature that shows the greatest distinction in usage between the decidedly holistic and the decidedly analytic thinker is classification (cf Vygotsky, 1978; Luria, 1976; Within, et. al, 1977). Language reflects classification in different ways. The holistic thinker tends to be very practical in classifying. Holistic thinkers do not classify hierarchically, i. e. do not classify by rank, nor under abstract general headings; their classification system is by relational - e.g. how things work together or relate to each other - or situational criteria. For example, a hierarchical classification exercise has been used often in freshman English classes at one university. The exercise presents a middle range term and requires the reader to fill in a more general and a more specific term. Answers tend to be situational and relational; for instance, given street, one student wrote dirty for general and 7th for specific; (7th street was generally a dirty "situation" in the student's mind.) given flower, a student wrote fresh for general and rose for specific. (Newsome, 1977)

Holistic thinkers also do not use various syntactic and semantic markers of classification. In the 1978 study of students' compositions, features previously identified by Odell (1977) as reflective of classification - such as predicate nominatives and similar labeling; use of phrases such as for example and for instance; use of words such as

class, resemble, and similar - were examined. Analytic thinkers used a significantly larger number of such features than did the holistic thinkers. These features signify comparisons; to make many comparisons, one must place these items into classes. Interestingly, use of contrastive features was not significantly different for the two types of thinkers. Teachers at one university have observed that the students prefer contrast to comparison. When asked to write essays of strict comparison - i.e. similarities only - the students usually write papers on differences, even after explict instructions and examples of what is desired for the assignments.

The last holistic language feature to be discussed, the use of concrete imagery, is a recognized aspect of Black culture. Leopold Senghor stated that imagery is one of the fundamental features of African style, that Africans find a language "wearisome" that does not tell a story, that the "European is empiric, the African ...mystic and metaphysical...", that African words are "pregnant with images." (Senghor, 1956). Matthews (1977) argues that the concrete "symbolic" image is the tool of a cognitive style preferred by Blacks throughout the world. He states: "In Black use the thought is generated through the use of a picture concept (visualization) rather than through the use of...theoretical statement...a picture of the thing as it really exists is put before the mind and imagination...one proceeds through visual thinking as against non-visual thinking." (1977, p. 16) Referring again to the hierarchical classification exercise, one sees how the pictures of the street and the rose determined the students' method of classifying, a method based on the visualization of these things as they exist.

Examples of the use of concrete imagery are widespread in Black language. The Blues, uniquely Black, are full of concrete images; references are to easily pictured, concrete items, not abstractions. For instance,

"You mix ink with water, bound to turn it black.'

"If he didn't like my potatoes, why did he dig so deep?"

"I got a coffee grinder, got the best one I could find."

"My woman's got a sweet jelly roll."

"I'm a mean oil well driller, been a driller since I been a man."

(Charters, 1963)

In these lyrics, concrete images of everyday objects form the metaphors for sexual relationships.

Looking at a more scholarly work, one also sees the extensive use of the concrete image. Throughout the non-fiction work The Black Anglo-Saxons, for example, Nathan Hare expresses his thoughts in copious images. First of all, the book's title, The Black Anglo-Saxons, points directly to Hare's message through an image. The title is an oxymoron, a figure of speech in which a seeming self-contradiction or apparent absurdity has in context a pointed meaning. This image does not merely adorn his message; it is his message; it identifies, discriminates, classifies, and judges. His chapter headings do the same; as examples, "The Dignitaries: Eunuch Leaders"; "The Image-Makers"; "The Mimics", and "The Pioneers". Within the text, the image is also pervasive. As a case in point, Hare describes the "eunuch leaders" by stating: " They must be content with a pawnshop power, acquired by their readiness to peddle the Negro's welfare for white favor...at best, they serve as electric contacts in the circuit of white-Negro polarity." In the Western tradition, a switch from "enuchs" to pawnshop brokers to "electric contracts" would constitute a mixed metaphor, one to be avoided; however, Hare draws upon different images to express his thought, to refine and explain his thesis to the reader.



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Turning to fiction, one notes an interesting use of a traditional African form, the proverb. Chinua Achebe, for instance, uses the proverb not merely as a touch of "local color" in his novels, but as an instrument of carrying an image that conducts the message of the passage. In his essay "The Role of the Writer in a New Nation" (1973), Achebe states: "An African writing in English finds himself describing situations or modes of thought which have no direct equivalent in the English way of life." Achebe's use of the proverb in his novels is an expression of the African mode of thought, holistic thought found in those of African descent around the world. The proverb communicates the affective aspects of Black life.

The proverb is a well-known form of oral literature. It is a precise and concise carrier of the philosophy and the thought patterns of the culture; not everyone is permitted to give proverbs as they require wisdom, experience, and reflection, and, thus, they carry levels of meaning apart from the primary message. When Achebe says that Obi Okonkowo's father, in No Longer At Ease, often uses proverbs, one immediately knows something of the character of the man. When Obi rejects everything about his father except one particular proverb - " a man who lives on the banks of the Niger should not wash his hands with spittle", one knows the ties to the traditional culture are still part of Obi's life despite his Western schooling, Western travels, and Western-style job. The Niger is the image of more than a river; it symbolizes a lifestyle, the African heritage; having access to its flowing clear waters, one need not turn to the corruption of the European lifestyle. All this information is carried in the image projected by the proverb.

Proverbs are an integral part of Afro-American life too. The concrete imagery of the proverb carries a wealth of meaning. For example: "Crow and corn can't grow in the same field", "Mighty poor bee don't



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make more honey than he want", Jaybird don't rob his own nest", "Looks won't do to split rails with", and "You can hide the fire, but what you going to do with the smoke?" ( Courlander, 1976)

In the introduction to George Lamming's autobiography, In the Castle of My Skin, Richard Wright writes: "Lamming's story ...is...a symbolic repetition of the story of millions...Lamming's quietly melodious prose renders with fidelity the myth content of folk minds, paints lovingly the personalities...sketches authentically the characters... and depicts the moods..." ( p.vi.)

Lamming draws many of his images from nature. For example, at the very opening of the book, the reader is met with the image of rain, rain in fact and rain, turning to flood, as the symbol of the feelings, the occurrences, the totality of the lives of the people of the island village:

> Rain, Rain, Rain...showers of blessing. The morning laden with cloud soon passed into noon, and the noon...into the sodden grimness of an evening that waded through water... the floods ... evoking the image of those legendary waters which had once risen to set a curse on the course of man ...As if in serious imitation of the waters that raced outside our lives...seemed to escape down an imaginary drain that was my future. ( Lamming, pp 1-2)

Younger scholars, too, show the use of concrete imagery, even when the traditional American teaching calls for restraint. For instance, here is the opening paragraph of an expository essay by a freshman student:

> Fate like pain holds no barriers, sets no limitations, and touches everyone. Kwesi is dead, killed by a poisonous snake. Is it an act of mercy from God or a cruel hand of fate? The numbness that results from novacaine can only slightly touch the depth of Maami Ama's pain.
>
> (Cooper, 1978)

The abstraction of fate is concretized as pain and then personified, given human abilities of being able to "set limitations" and "touch"; numbness is related to a very practical occurrence, use of novacaine - as experienced by almost anyone who has visited a dentist.



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It is not possible in such a limited time period to cover all the links between Black language, Black culture, and holistic cognitive style.Those presented are a sampling which will perhaps spur further investigation. Some of the language aspects reviewed are directly derived from the Black culture and reinforced by the holistic style; others are more subtle and come about as Blacks, and other holistic thinkers, adapt language to their cognitive purposes and views. All are indicative of a holistic cognitive style which the traditional culture prefers and reinforces.

" No everybody ride him jackass same fashion."

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